



Photo (above and opposite) by chris.j. Doran

From Yesterday to Tomorrow

Does Your Cemetery Have a Plan?

It's inevitable. Cemeteries, no matter how large and sprawling, will eventually run out of space. The dead, after all, aren't going anywhere and the living will continue needing a place to remember and respect and study the past – for generations to come at the very least.

Running out of cemetery space is not a new problem and has, in fact, pushed cemetery plans and structures to where they are today and to where they are headed tomorrow, next year and beyond. In the early 18th century, for example, most of the people in the United States were being interred inside churches, beneath the floorboards and as close to the altars as possible. This perhaps wasn't the most forward-looking plan — it didn't take long to fill these areas.

The next logical step was to move the deceased outside, although they didn't move too far. Enter the church graveyard. Those, too, filled to bursting capacity. And not only that, the public health reformers at the time were concerned with the cleanliness of such graveyards, which became

known as possible sources of disease.

“Although 20th century Americans typically regard ... church graveyards as picturesque, the colonists tended to view them as foul smelling, unattractive eyesores,” wrote Kenneth T. Jackson and Camilo Jose Vergara in their 1989 book, “Silent Cities: The Evolution of the American Cemetery.”

In the late 1700s, the country started to move away from the crowded church graveyards and build non-denominational, less cluttered and more planned cemeteries – the cemeteries we know today. And then the worry about space seemed to end.

But while these new cemeteries certainly had structure and immediate plans, how much planning did they do for the future? Did they think 200 years into the future? Did they think about where they would land in the year 2006? And are we, in fact, thinking about where the cemetery of today will be in the year 2206?

OK, maybe 200 years is asking too much, but the reality is that cemetery space has become limited and will only continue on this path. Even 50

years ago, the country was a much more open place, and the local cemetery had plenty of room. This is not necessarily so today, to the distress of many cemeterians.

Space is a particularly tricky issue for older cemeteries. And cemeterians are often discouraged by the type of space they do have left in their parks, considering the land unusable due to it being too rocky, steep or wet. Good news, though. Many times, with a little creativity and some education on how land and water work together, these areas are no longer hopeless pieces of land, but they can become revenue builders.

“Left-over lands are often awkwardly configured or steep or wet places that are hard to develop,” said Jack Goodnoe, president of the Michigan-based firm, Cemetery Planning and Design.

Yet, Goodnoe encourages his clients to take a new look at these areas, which are prime real estate for high-density features such as columbariums and mausoleums. And, in fact, those are the exact features the market is





This unused, dead-end road has a distant view and is an ideal location for developing family estates with a columbarium court and overlook.

looking for anyway. Who hasn't realized the rise in cremation? These so-called "problem" areas are perhaps not as problematic as they once appeared.

Goodnoe worked with one cemetery in Kentucky that had an area with an unused spur road leading to a rocky cliff. The cemetery had

made some use of the land to either side of the road by including burial space there, but the road and cliff area were deemed unusable, lost land.

"I suggested that they remove the road and put in a meditation court with a columbarium wall overlooking the cliff," he said. "People would be able to walk up to this high point and

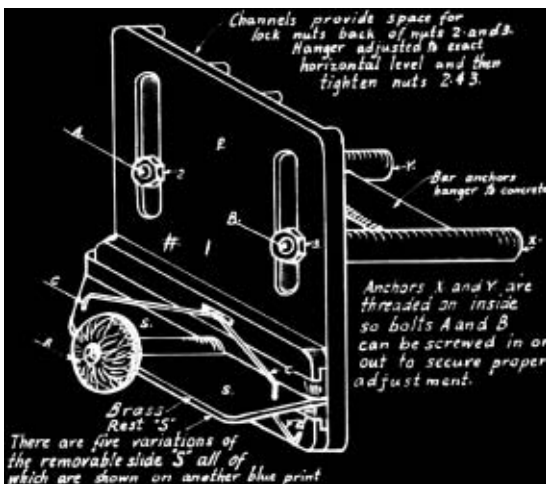
get a panoramic view of the city."

In Goodnoe's plan for this area, the columbarium wall would include between 50 and 75 niches in the overlook court with room for six to eight family estates with two or three burials a piece on each side of a central path leading to the overlook. "Not only do you create the new inventory, but now it becomes premium inventory because of the setting," he explained.

In yet another historic cemetery, this one located in Pennsylvania, Goodnoe had the task of creating a plan for open land within an unused boulevard entrance that had been closed because of its unsafe proximity to a new high-traffic intersection. He suggested that the cemetery carve the 20-foot wide area median down a layer, creating a three-foot sunken garden or court. "Hold up the sides with niches or crypts and include a columbarium feature in the middle," he said. "It's just a matter of re-thinking your physical plan."

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Many cemeteries, in fact, have used lawn crypts to increase their capacity. “The result is more density per acre,” said Larry Anspach, president of the cemetery consulting firm, American Cemetery/Mortuary Consultants Inc.

Traditional in-ground burial averages 1,250 graves to an acre, “while double depth lawn crypts average 2,500 per acre, and mausoleums average 5,000 crypts per acre,” said Anspach.

And then there are cemetery operations such as Inglewood Park Cemetery in Los Angeles that installed over 28,000 crypts underground in about 1.5 acres. “They have installed these under roadways and parking lots,” said Anspach. “They look like the catacombs in Rome, you can barely see the end of the hallway.”

He added, “I have clients in Mexico who have installed lawn crypts eight deep.” A typical United States lawn crypt might reach two or three vaults deep which, in itself, is a good idea for those cemeteries who have yet to



Hidden in an unused area, this drainage channel offers the opportunity for premium columbarium facilities with meditation trails and overlooks.

enter this market.

“Woodlawn Cemetery in New York designed crypts for an unused hillside to extend the life of their cemetery,” said Anspach.

Woodlawn Cemetery, one of the oldest and largest cemeteries in the country, still has approximately 20 acres of undeveloped land which,

according to the cemetery’s president, John Toale Jr., should equate to a minimum of 50 years.

“Woodlawn may be an anomaly because trends may change – like an increase in the rate of cremation – but we have the ability to still sell as much land for burials as we wish because other metropolitan New York

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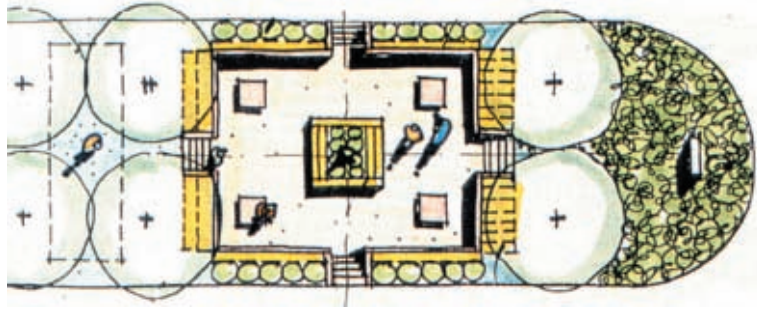
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A recessed garden and meditation court creates new columbarium and wall crypt facilities in the boulevard median of a closed, historic entrance.

cemeteries will be closing over the next 50 years,” he said.

Still, Woodlawn has a plan, not to mention a lot of rocky areas. In 2000, they did a comprehensive master plan “and identified the highest and best use of all remaining undeveloped land,” said Toale. “Naturally, the areas of rock are designated for mausoleum buildings.”

While this is not always easy, Woodlawn’s annual goal is to sell 70 percent crypts and niches and 30 percent ground burial plots. “We rely primarily on presentation to all families and commission schedule of sales counselors to achieve the goal.”

Toale touched on an important point, though, that Goodnoe fully agrees with — the importance of a master plan. Even if a cemetery doesn’t have the resources to hire a professional planner, “they should at least take the time to think about the unique characteristics and opportunities associated with each piece of land they have left,” said Goodnoe. “They need to back up from the project and ask themselves, ‘what are we going to be doing 20 years from now?’”

Without some kind of forecast, cemeteries may end up wasting time, for example, moving excessive amounts of land or not taking advantage of a particular slope that could be easily converted into a high-density area.

And without some kind of understanding of how land and water work together, mistakes are imminent.

“Land is more precious now because it is a limited and expensive resource,” said Goodnoe. “The older cemeteries didn’t have that constriction. One thing that is increas-

ingly more important to making the best use of these limited land resources when in planning cemeteries today is that you have to be respectful of the natural conditions in order to use them properly. If you understand the specific characteristics of each area, you can take awkward pieces of land and turn them into features. Cemetery planning today requires more ardent understanding and respect for natural conditions so that you use them to your advantage and don’t incur unnecessary expense.”

An example: Lake View Cemetery in Cleveland, Ohio. The cemetery, which calls itself “Cleveland’s Outdoor Museum and Arboretum,” is well known for its natural beauty. Yet, one piece of that natural beauty was causing spatial issues for the cemetery. Namely, the stream that runs through the park. While certainly an attractive element, the water and associated wet areas were also prohibiting the cemetery from using this area for burials.

“One of the directions of the master plan was to take a look at the drainage way through the middle of the cemetery as a place to put meditation walks, columbarium overlooks and to actually use what they once turned away from,” said Goodnoe. “But this does require understanding about how soil, water and vegetation systems operate, how to manage rainwater flows, build structures and manage the water without building excessive infrastructure.”

And yes, for the most part, cemeteries do have a much better understanding today of what is referred to as “green infrastructure.” Or, in other words, “not having to use so much traditional piping and hard infrastructure systems that are

expensive to build and maintain,” said Goodnoe.

A cemetery that Goodnoe worked on in Battle Creek, Mich., had an interesting dilemma. The entire site was actually created by ancient sand dunes that had blown in from Wisconsin over the previous eons. As a result of studying the soil conditions — and discovering its sandy composition — they were able to take all the storm water and put it into gentle grassed ditches on each side of the road. The water was held there, and it “percolated very rapidly into the soil,” said Goodnoe, “so the cemetery could be built without a curb and gutter, without drain inlets and without piping.”

The end result? Savings. “There was a huge savings of building the roads without all the drainage structures. And also a huge savings for not having to maintain all those pipes,” said Goodnoe. “All they have to do to maintain the drainage system is, basically, to mow the grass.”

Back to the plan. Whether or not a cemetery has the funds to fully implement all the elements of a master plan, there is no doubt that they should at least have one. The first step, said Goodnoe, is to create what he calls a “framework,” which considers not only the natural resources of the cemetery, but also the market preferences apt to shift the inventory mix of the cemetery in the future. The two in concert will help the cemetery to understand where it is going and how to successfully get there.

One of the biggest differences in today’s market, according to Goodnoe, is that people want choices. “Fifty or 100 years ago, virtually everyone was interested in ground burial,” said Goodnoe. “A few were interested in mausoleums and virtually no one was interested in cremation.” However, whether someone wants cremation, burial or entombment, today’s customer definitely wants choice.

“The buyer today is used to going to the mall and having a wide range of choices. If you want a car, you go to an auto mall,” said Goodnoe. “The mentality of variety and choice has affected the cemetery market and it’s up to the sales people to educate the public on what those choices are.”

From a planning standpoint, Goodnoe often suggests to his clients that, when building new areas in the cemetery, to include what he calls “an outdoor salesroom.” Use one section to create various options in proximity to one another.

The reason — people are not always decided when they come to a cemetery to purchase space for themselves. “If you have an area in the cemetery that has a lot of diversity, this area becomes almost like a salesroom,” said Goodnoe. And think how much easier it would be for the salesperson to be able to bring buyers to one section of the cemetery and show them all their options at once — a ground burial area is just a head’s turn away from a garden crypt setting, a scattering ground and a mausoleum.

“You don’t want to make a mess of it, design-wise, but you want to offer a lot of choices within a certain area,” he said. “This concept never occurred consciously in the older cemeteries.”

Another fundamental difference with cemeteries today is that the marketplace is now a moving target — and for that reason, cemeteries must be flexible when planning for the future. But how can you plan at all when the market is in constant flux? Just 50 years ago, no one could have planned that the country’s average cremation rate would be nearing 30 percent.

A loose framework, though, could have been enough of a plan to assist cemeteries with such unexpected changes — and can be enough for future changes as well, according to Goodnoe. “Design-wise, I look to creating a framework that fits with the land and the sites drainage patterns,” he explained.

To create a basic framework, Goodnoe determines how the cemetery slopes — its orientation, its visual character, its exposure to or protection from the elements — and where the water runs and collects, among other things.

By studying the land, a cemetery can determine, even years before actual implementation, where they may safely and cost-effectively place buildings, features, landscape and roads. “You don’t necessarily have to determine what kind of burial will be every-



Landforms and drainage patterns are the basis for roadway and section layout that meet the specific, ethnic design requirements of this cemetery.

where,” he said, “but if the roads are in the right places and the water collects in the right places and the features are in the right places, even if you don’t build it, you know where the buildings will go.”

In essence, a framework allows the cemetery to enter a first phase of expansion to meet today’s market needs and, also, be ready for future phases, even if the inventory ratios need to be adjusted at that future date to meet the current market.

Another major difference between the cemetery market of yesterday and today — and one that is only expected to grow — is the need for cemeteries to become ethnically specific.

Cypress Lawn Cemetery in San Francisco, for example, purchased a golf course and turned it into a new and ethnically-diverse section of the cemetery. They studied their market and, when creating their plan to develop more space, they listened to that market.

Cypress Lawn had several distinct needs to fulfill. “We had a customer base that had some very specific design standards, mainly Feng Shui,” said Kenneth E. Varner, president of the cemetery. “We serve mainly Chinese, Anglo, Hispanic and Filipino families, and each group has its own needs.”

In this situation, Goodnoe was given the puzzle of figuring out how to include very diverse needs into one cemetery.

The Chinese community wanted burial space that met the principles of Feng Shui, in which the upright stones needed to be open at the front and facing downhill, toward water. From the rear and sides, the burial site had to be protected by rising elements such as hills. “So we designed the cemetery very specifically at a master plan level,” said Goodnoe. “The Asians were given the higher ground that sloped in the correct direction ... and the way the roads and the landscape were laid out to help reinforce the sense of protection.” All of this was accomplished by working in cooperation with with a Feng Shui master.

The Latino community, which favored double-depth ground burial with flat markers, explained Goodnoe, “were given the flatter ground which kept the views open for the Asian market. We used the inherent character of the land to reflect and accommodate the ethnic preferences.”

“Now let me caution you that there is a balance you want to keep,” added Varner. “I have seen cemeteries that want to cater to a certain group and they do it in a way that limits their cemetery. You must move slowly.”

Regardless of how fast the market is moving, caution and planning are the words of the time. After all, there is only so much space left and while options are wide open, decisions must be careful. •